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CONTACT: Melissa Wagoner
(202) 224-2633

KENNEDY ADDRESSES HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE ISSUES

United States Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

(As Prepared for Delivery)

I want to thank Senator Sanders for his dedication to this topic and for working so hard on this hearing today. I also want to thank Senators Enzi and Murkowski for their work on this issue.

To create a healthy nation we must not only have health care professionals that are excellently trained—we need health care professionals that are excellently trained in the right fields and practicing in the communities that need them the most. Over the years, experts have predicted a physician shortage, only to change those projections years later. We've heard of shortages in one specialty or another, only to have that prediction change as well. But one thing that has remained constant is the need for a strong network of primary care providers.

The health of our nation depends on a strong primary care system. And that system can not run without an adequate supply of primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and other providers. In implementing health reform in Massachusetts one thing has become very clear--comprehensive health reform can not take place without appropriate access to primary care providers. Unfortunately, we are facing a crisis in primary care. Family medicine residency positions have dropped by 50% since 1997 and the growth in the supply of primary care physicians for adult patients is now lagging behind the rate of growth of adults. Community health centers continue to report significant vacancies for primary care providers.

We must take the steps needed to ensure a strong primary care workforce. One of those steps is making sure that the Title VII health professions training programs are adequately funded. Amazingly, President Bush dramatically cut these programs in his budget. It is incomprehensible to me that President Bush would cut funding for these important programs in the face of primary care physician and other provider shortages. He even eliminated the health professions diversity programs that help to create a culturally competent diverse workforce that will serve in communities that need care the most.

This hearing will inform our committee as we move forward on our work to reauthorize the Title VII and Title VIII programs. I want to thank all of our witnesses that have joined us today. They will provide us with a wealth of knowledge on the current state of affairs with the primary care workforce, including the challenges in rural and frontier areas and the importance of diversity in the health professions. There are also other primary care providers that we were not able to accommodate at this hearing, but

we have asked for their official testimony to be included in the record so we can receive their important input.

I also want to acknowledge that while this hearing focuses on primary care providers, I am aware of the profound nursing shortage in our country and I will be working with Senator Mikulski and other members of the committee in the coming months to address that issue as well.

We know that primary care helps to reduce healthcare cost and results in a better quality of care of patients and I look forward to hearing more about what we can do support our nation's primary care providers.

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